

•SANTA•CLAUS'S•PONY.

BY ELLA F. MOSBY.

IT was a little town in Belgium. There were the storks' nests on the high red roofs to which the children pointed, as they pattered by in their little wooden shoes, or *sabots*; and there were small carts drawn by the strong draught-dogs of Flemish breed, looking at their owners with patient, faithful eyes. There were old churches and houses, telling a story in wood or stone to every passer-by.

In one of these old houses, built with queer gables and little balconies and with a date and the name of the builder carved over the door, once lived two boys—Jan and Peter Stein. They were sons of a thrifty, honest Flemish burgher, who gave with an open hand to “God’s poor,” of whom there were very many after the sad wars of those days. There were so many, indeed, that the good burgher’s own household lived very plainly, except at the joyous Christmas-time, when all Christians keep feast.

The children in Belgium have a charming

Christmas legend about Santa Claus's Pony. They always place their wooden *sabots* on the window-ledge, stuffed full of oats, hay, and fodder for the “dear Christmas pony.” In the early morning they run on tiptoe to look; and behold! the hay is all gone, and the shoes are brimming over with toys and sweetmeats! Then the children clap their hands with glee, and wish they could only have waked in time to see the pony munching his oats. That would have been such fun!

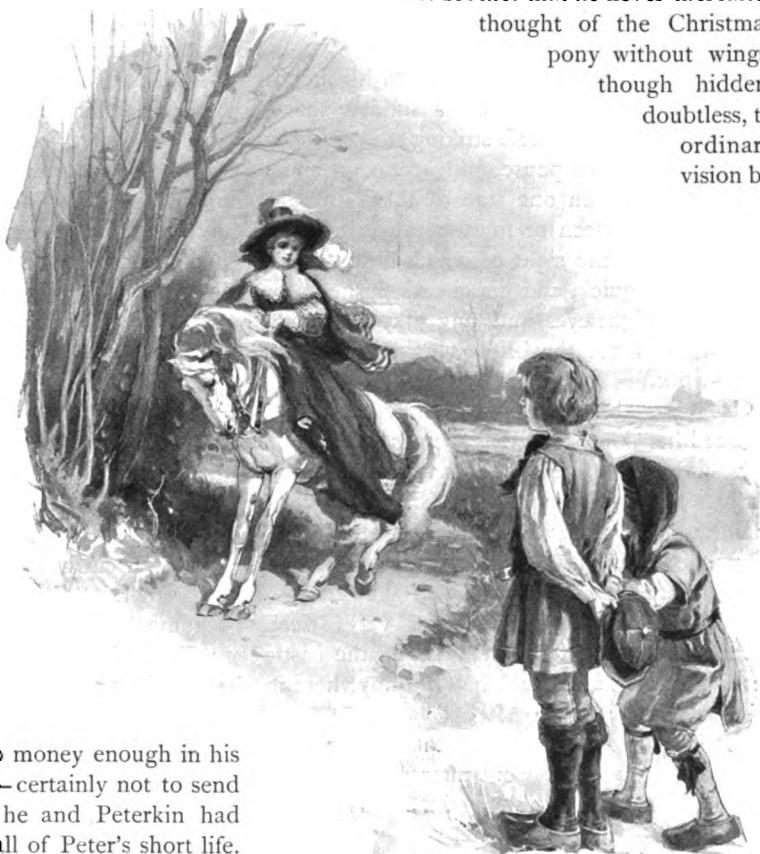
Christmas week in Burgher Stein’s household was one of great plenty; and not only every friend but every beggar that knocked at the side door had a share. There were black puddings and liver puddings, geese stuffed with chestnuts, and more than one noble turkey with truffles; and for at least a week beforehand was the little mother busy in the kitchen, mixing the rich Walloon wafers, that made little Peter’s mouth water even when he happened to be thinking of them on a midsummer day.

Jan was four years and a half older than Peter, and he did not care so much either about the plain living all the year or the stuffed geese and wafers at Christmas; he wanted to go to school at the "Griffin House," as he called the old stone building carved with griffins and dragons for water-spouts and gargoyles and gable-ends, where they taught drawing and carving and architecture, as well as other things less delightful. Now, he and Peter went to school to Captain Jacobi, who asked very little money, but also taught very little learning. How could he, when he had been fighting all the time until he lost his leg? If Jan had wanted, indeed, to hear about battles and sieges—but Jan's heart was set upon building up in stone and marble some of the fairy dreams he had in his brain. He loved even the queer old stone griffins on the school-house with the quirks in their impossible tails. But the tender-hearted burgher could never keep money enough in his purse to send Jan there—certainly not to send both of his boys—and he and Peterkin had never been separated in all of Peter's short life. No; Jan's heart sank; it was altogether impossible.

"Go, boys," called their mother from the spicy, steaming kitchen, "go quickly and bring home the red cow. She has strayed away to the marsh; but be careful, boys, don't stay out after sunset. It is Christmas eve, remember."

As if they had forgotten it for one moment during the day! As if their Sunday *sabots* were not already arranged on the tall window-ledge, and filled with oats and hay and grass for the Christmas pony! To Peterkin's affectionate

heart the Christmas pony was a wonderful and glorified creature. On summer holidays when Santa Claus was busy in his workshop, fashioning toys for winter delights, he imagined the white pony with its fiery, shining eyes and long waving mane and tail, as free, like himself, and enjoying many an untrammeled run and caper in a Paradise-pasture. Having once seen a picture of the Greek Pegasus, he confessed to his brother that he never thereafter thought of the Christmas pony without wings, though hidden, doubtless, to ordinary vision by



"A LITTLE GIRL RIDING A WHITE PONY, AT THE SIGHT OF WHICH LITTLE PETER'S BREATH CAME QUICK."
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his long, silvery mane. He believed firmly that one night he had actually heard him neigh softly, and paw at the wooden ledge.

Both the boys were restless—"Christmas was in their bones"—and so they ran with

delight along the frozen path to the marshes to find "Kneidel," the strayed red cow.

The ground was so level that they could see all around them for a great distance; and there, sure enough, was Kneidel, looking disappointedly at the withered grasses on the farther edge of the marsh. She seemed redder than ever in the glow of the sky, which was a deep red with a few dark clouds above like smoke.

"It looks like a goblin smithy," said Jan.

"Where they shoe with silver the Christmas pony," added Peter, laughing.

He put his hands on each side of his mouth to call Kneidel home, when a sudden sharp, ringing sound, as of hoofs striking on the frozen ground, made him pause, and around a small body of woods on one side of them came a little girl of thirteen or fourteen years riding a white pony, at the sight of which little Peter's breath came quick, and his cheeks flushed; for had it not bright eyes, and long silky mane and tail, and was not the bridle shining with rich metal-work.

Its rider, the young girl, drew rein, and checked her pony's speed as soon as she saw the boys. Her eyes were black and lustrous, and her hair dark. She did not look like the girls of Flanders, nor was her dress like theirs; and when she spoke it was with a decidedly foreign accent.

"You are Flemish boys I see," she said, addressing Jan, and her voice was very sweet. "Can you tell me in what direction the castle lies? I thought it could be seen anywhere in this flat country."

"It is the old windmill that cuts off the view here," answered Jan, "but after you cross the marsh yonder it is visible again. It is not far away."

"Then I will wait for the others," said the little lady, for so she seemed to be from her manner and look. "I was going to spend Christmas Eve with my godmother — at the castle — and my father did not return. So, as I wished *very* much to go, the steward and the governess prepared to go with me, and they were so slow — oh, so slow! — that my pony ran away, and I find myself lost." But there was a ring of mischievous laughter in the last sentence, and Jan suspected the pony was not altogether to blame.

"Is this the Christmas pony?" suddenly

asked Peterkin, after an absorbed contemplation of the pretty white creature.

"Is it? — oh, yes, it is Santa Claus's pony!" she answered with a merry glance at Jan; and eyes, lips, and dimples overbrimming with silent laughter. She evidently remembered the Flemish legend.

"Come," she said suddenly to Jan, with child-like impulse, "since I have to wait, tell me about yourselves; tell me what *you* would rather have — oh, of all things in the whole wide world! — for your Christmas gift!"

Children's hearts fly quickly open, and Jan was soon telling her, while she listened with wide, eager eyes, of his dream of going to the "Griffin House" and learning to build churches and palaces; and how he could not do it, because he could never have the heart to rob "God's poor" of his father's aid in charity. Nor would he go without little Peter.

They were talking so eagerly that another rider was with them before they noticed his approach: a tall, dignified, dark-looking gentleman, wrapped in a long Spanish cloak and wearing a plumed hat. At the sight of him, and the sound of the young girl's rapturous cry, "Father!" Jan's lips closed, and a sullen and lowering look came over his frank face. He replied curtly to their thanks, and turned to his brother. "Call Kneidel, Peter, and let us go home."

"Kneidel has gone, brother"; and so she had, like a sensible cow, mindful of supper and shelter; and the sunset fires of the winter sky were burned almost to embers.

They had separated, the young rider with a hurt, amazed look on her face, when Jan turned back and said to the gentleman, "Do not cross the marsh there. The holes are black and deep, and dangerous for horses. Take the longer road around. You will be at your goal the sooner — and the safer."

"You do not like to warn us," said the Spaniard, looking curiously at his half-averted, reluctant face. "Why?"

"Because you are Spanish," answered the lad, his honest gray eyes suddenly aflame.

"Who is your father?" questioned the Spaniard.

Jan's heart filled with dismayed apprehen-

sion. He remembered that he had told the daughter, already, however.

"There is no need to tell," he answered sturdily. "I have not been treacherous to you, at least"; and his eyes sought the girl's eyes in warning.

She spoke quickly in spite of a frown on her father's brow: "No; you have been a generous foe. We owe you only thanks."

There was a suspicion of tears about her long lashes, and Jan found it hard to listen to little Peter as they hastened homeward.

"It is strange she should have



the Christmas pony," he was saying in a perplexed tone.

"Strange things always happen at Christmas," his brother answered dreamily.

Next morning a silken purse of gold pieces hung outside the window with a scroll attached:

"For Jan and Peter Stein, that they may go to the School of the Griffins.

From Santa Claus's Pony.

Jan Stein's desire was fulfilled. He and Peter went to the Griffin School and learned all about carving and building in wood and stone. They used to plan together what they would build as soon as they were grown; big churches, perhaps, and stately houses, but certainly a town-hall for their own dear town, for the old one had been quite ruined by Spanish shells. Jan would have it adorned with pictures from its own history, and with carvings of familiar leaves and blossoms, and of common animals with their homely, everyday ways.

"The storks on their rough nests, and the big dogs harnessed to the cart—these would *I* have," said Jan.

"And the Christmas pony!" exclaimed Peter, his eyes kindling with the old enthusiasm. "On the central tablet would I carve him, and he should have wings, to show he is of no common stock, but of heavenly breed and nurture, and little panniers on his back out of which crowd all kinds of toys, and in front a child's *sabots* full of grass and barley. That should be my part, and under it would be only *Peterkin*, for the name of the carver."

"Why?" asked Jan, wonderingly, for this was only his home-name.

"Because I shall be always 'little Peter' beside you, brother!"

Peter took the greatest delight in thinking how great and famous Jan would be some day; and then, he thought, Jan would meet the little Spanish lady, and they would be true friends. Peter did not live to see Jan's success, for he died while they were students. But I think Jan did no work without writing under his own name that of *Peter Stein*, since surely it was his brother's thought as well as his, though only Jan's hand carved it in stone!